

REINVENTING PEACE IN SYRIA

For Syria, and the rest of the world, the era of liberal peacebuilding has passed. But there are other ways to make peace, which call for a return to basics and a new kind of “software”

By Achim Wennmann

After eight years of war, there is undoubtedly a peace to build in Syria but the what, how, who, and when of this endeavor are far from obvious. What is clear, however, is that building a peace in Syria will not be business as usual for Western policymakers because so-called “liberal peacebuilding”—comprehensive programs that aim to achieve order, prosperity, and participatory political systems after civil wars—has little prospect for traction. This is because policymakers are facing a “fierce state,” in which the government prioritizes only its own survival and designs its institutions accordingly, as well as a region driven by actors who maintain peace via illiberal and authoritarian practices. The challenge of these conditions is, as political scientist Steven Heydemann wrote in a 2018 Brookings report, “the near impossibility of pursuing any form of reconstruction support that will not contribute to the regime’s project of authoritarian stabilization and demographic change, or avoid channelling funds into the pockets of regime cronies and warlords”. Any hope that the current period is merely transitory and that the international community can go back to building liberal states and economies in the near future, he adds, is deeply misguided.

What should Western policymakers do? Their patients no longer respond to the standard treatments, and instead look to other doctors who offer treatments to keep them alive, but do not have answers for their chronic conditions.

To begin, they must place the challenge of reconstruction in Syria within the broader context of building peace in an era of “third wave of autocratization,” described by scholars Anna Lührmann and Staffan Lindberg as the gradual erosion of the democratic attributes of states and societies. A focus on Syria’s reconstruction can help assess the opportunities and limits for reinventing peacebuilding practice. Such a focus speaks to those interested in reconstructing Syria by exploring what a peacebuilding perspective on reconstruction can look like; on the other hand, it speaks to peacebuilders by challenging them to



reinvent peacebuilding in the face of ever more autocratic governance in many parts of the world.

△ Syrian refugees return to the city of Qusayr in Syria, July 7, 2019. Omar Sanadiki/Reuters

Peacebuilding is possible in Syria as reconstruction is starting, and it is possible under conditions of a fierce state or authoritarian peace. Yet, to recognize the opportunities for peacebuilding, policymakers need to begin seeing it as a form of software, rather than as a comprehensive program. They need to lay to rest an understanding of liberal peacebuilding that was part of the post-Cold War era. They also need to recognize the operational challenges that accompanied liberal peacebuilding, and that it has been overtaken by stabilization and counterterror policies as of the mid-2000s, when the war on terror became a predominant policy framework.

The importance of peacebuilding in this era should be understood as one based on the use of dialogue, trust-building, and consensus-seeking processes to resolve, transform, or manage conflict through nonviolent means. If understood as a software—or an operating system that makes things work—peacebuilding is versatile and can be applied not only to how reconstruction packages are negotiated or ultimately implemented in Syria, but may also be relevant for other challenges, such as reforming Syria’s security sector, or exiting local war economies. Understanding peacebuilding in this way means going forward in a more piecemeal fashion, solving problems where possible and through iterative processes, and addressing conflict systems rather than events.

A Changing Global Landscape

Over the last three decades, international peacebuilding practice has been dominated by a set of assumptions that put countries on the path to a so-called liberal peace. The UN and other international actors concentrated their efforts to end armed conflict through peace agreements, to be implemented through a cocktail of peacekeeping operations, state-building, and peacebuilding programs. Such international assistance became guided by the aim to establish an array of functional components including constitutions, elections, institutions, and reconciliation mechanisms. Many peace agreements defined the terms for the trajectory toward these elements and provided for the requisite international support. Over time, an increasingly professionalized set of actors emerged to serve the different phases of peace processes.

Yet, the liberal project to rebuild states and societies after armed conflict is becoming increasingly orphaned, cashless, and dysfunctional. The United States supported liberal peacebuilding as a normative, global policy agenda after the Cold War, having previously used a liberal agenda to construct an international order to expand its imperial reach after the Second World War. But in recent years, Washington has been retreating from globalism and from being a supporter of liberal values. Furthermore, major European countries—such as Germany, the UK, and Sweden—as well as the European Union (EU), are or likely will be stepping away from financing peacebuilding programs in the face of more proximate interests and threats associated with extremism or unregulated migration.

Such developments illustrate that transformation toward a multipolar order is well under way, heralding a period of turbulence driven by power politics and fights for zones of influence. In such a new order, the United States, the EU, and individual European countries have limited leeway to set post-conflict agendas, as illustrated in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Afghanistan. After a series of ill-fated military interventions, many Western states may also have lost legitimacy to act as credible peacebuilders in the eyes of conflict-affected populations.

The End of Liberal Peacebuilding

The changing global landscape for peacebuilding underlines a new reality for Western policymakers that may not have fully sunk in yet: liberal peacebuilding is dying because the historic period which shaped it—the early 1990s through the mid-2000s—is over. This timeline began after the Cold War when Western states needed a standard treatment to exit civil wars and the United States dominated global politics; it ended with the beginning of the war on terror, which emphasized state-centered security and stabilization designs instead of liberal

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peacebuilding within the Western policy community. The war on terror also became a bridge-builder with non-liberal states to confront common enemies, especially in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

This waning of liberal peacebuilding is further illustrated by the changing assumptions driving post-conflict exits. The dominant, post-Cold War consensus involved a theory of change by which a functioning state and society produce order, prosperity, and political participation all at once. Over the last decade, however, this approach has been challenged by an alternative theory that prioritizes state-centered and driven order and prosperity with political participation being phased in later in the process (if at all). Many Western governments and international organizations have also shifted their narratives from “peacebuilding” to “resilience” or “stabilization,” thereby emphasizing the need for order and control over the transformative change of underlying drivers of conflict.

The prioritization of stability—and the elite bargains necessary to achieve it—has increasingly undermined liberal peacebuilding. New research emphasizes how the tension between order and change produces trade-offs, challenging the assumption that elite bargains will necessarily promote stability, economic growth, and equitable development simultaneously. In reality, stability is often predicated upon rent-sharing arrangements that are problematic in terms of providing foundations for other policy goals such as poverty reduction and good governance.

These findings are significant in showing that the progressive normalizing of stabilization or counterterror policies by Western governments has come to undermine value-based foreign policies—such as those of the EU—and expose the practical limits of narratives about post-conflict economic revival and inclusive politics.

Recognizing these tendencies, some scholars observe that liberal peacebuilding is headed for the dustbin. This may be correct but it does not mean that peacebuilding—in general—is dead. From this perspective, liberal peacebuilding has only been a (small) part of a much broader spectrum of practices that aim to prevent and reduce violent conflict and build peace. This is particularly the case when thinking about the myriad of community-based initiatives in many places that build peace on a daily basis without calling what they do “peacebuilding”.

Yet, policymakers may ask what’s next if liberal peacebuilding—the standard treatment over the last three decades—is no longer a policy option. The following sections set out to reimagine peacebuilding practice, using Syria as a test case.

Syria's Reconfiguration

Over the last four years, Syria has moved from stalemate to authoritarian peace, with the regime of President Bashar Al-Assad slowly regaining control of the

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field. Yet, what is left beyond the security sector or the immediate interest of the regime appears to be a shell state with little functional capacity to deliver services. The fracture of Syria's political and economic space has shaped the rise of new elites that act as gatekeepers for access to local sources of wealth and to local populations. Outside actors keep their respective levers of influence over this mix of constituents at national and local levels and remain engaged in Syria in pursuit of their own agendas. At

the same time, the Syrian regime seems to establish a new balance between core institutions and different local constituencies by bartering loyalty against the continuation of wealth accumulation.

Some of these new configurations are shaping facts on the ground in terms of post-conflict economic recovery and reconstruction. Russia and Iran are believed to be securing a foothold in economic and reconstruction opportunities in efforts also portrayed as payback for support during the war. They benefit from a first-mover advantage to access some of the most profitable opportunities, exploiting the inability of the government and the limits of European and U.S. entities to become more systematically involved due to the sanctions regime.

These developments are accompanied by an international discourse on reconstruction. The first is a discourse on the cost of war, which emphasizes that significant resources will be needed for post-conflict rebuilding. In the context of these needs, neither the government of Syria, nor Russia or Iran, are in a position to provide tangible prospects and a sustainable vision for post-conflict reconstruction beyond highly localized efforts in zones in which they have privileged access. Some actors believe it is for Western states and institutions to shoulder this burden. Yet, these have made clear—as expressed by an EU commission on Syria—that they “will be ready to assist in the reconstruction of Syria only when a comprehensive, genuine, and inclusive political transition, negotiated by the Syrian parties in the conflict on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and the Geneva Communique, is firmly under way”. Such statements stand in contrast to the reality on the ground, which is characterized by increasing control of territory by the Syrian regime.

Given the current patchwork of “pacified” areas on the one hand, and zone of active warfighting on the other, the Syrian government as well as local warlords have little incentive to push for and commit to a formal political resolution to

the war. To start with, the preservation of power will become more difficult once the war is over. In part this is due to the sheer necessity to deliver vital services such as education, jobs, transportation, and so on, but also to the operational challenge of delivering them, including the needed institutional capacity, human resources, and budgetary resources. If the war is over, the population will judge the government, warlords, or opposition groups based on their ability to deliver and perform, which in consequence builds legitimacy. Yet, it also means that the war can no longer be used as an excuse for things not working or moving forward.

These constellations suggest that Syria's reconstruction in the coming years may take place under a "no-war, no-peace" scenario. This scenario offers enough flexibility to advance many reconciliation realities that have their own local logics, interests, and particularities. It also keeps open the possibility for the government to regain control of territory and control access to economic

spaces and flows, especially remittances, aid, and investment. As the war status is formally upheld, a no-war, no-peace scenario also opens the opportunity to assure international assistance for reconstruction under a "humanitarian" umbrella including those promised at the Third Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region in March 2019, also known as Brussels III. Such tactical manipulation of humanitarian aid expands the international resources available for reconstruction and the strengthening of state-related entities, while at the same time enabling a normalization for the

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government of Syria in the coming years. It also allows Western governments to save face diplomatically in the short term and keep to a narrative of value-driven foreign policies, while progressively opening opportunities for their private sectors to enter a prospective reconstruction market. In the long term, however, this contradiction may be exposed as counterproductive, as humanitarian aid targeted for the survival of people during war and humanitarian-disguised reconstruction targeted to rebuild the country strengthens a political system that has little to offer in terms of lasting solutions for Syria's many fault lines of conflict.

Thus, without systematically integrating a peacebuilding logic into humanitarian assistance and reconstruction, policymakers will either perpetuate a no-war, no-peace situation or plant the seeds of a new violent conflict.

Peacebuilding in Three Steps

In the face of the strategic landscape of reconstruction in Syria charted above, how can we conceive entry points for peacebuilding at a time of post-conflict

reconstruction in Syria? This question is analyzed in three steps: (1) Go back to basics, (2) change your pair of glasses, and (3) start in your own backyard.

Step 1: Go back to basics

Many professional peacebuilders share an understanding that peacebuilding involves several key principles. These include, for instance, relentless prioritization of the prevention and reduction of violence and conflict; engagement of the conflict parties on their partisan interests; working within the de facto political economy; and targeting international support for locally-led processes. Professional peacebuilders would also agree that peacebuilding has grown out of aligning several strategic building blocks. These include, for instance, trustworthy data, collaborative analysis, progressively expanded coalitions for change, targeted interventions that address the most acute risk factors of conflict and violence, and sustained institutional support by an honest broker.

Within this sequence, the generation of trustworthy data is an important entry point for peacebuilding. Making sense of the local context and conflict dynamics and separating information from dis-information is challenging in rumor-rich and information-poor environments, yet they are challenges all actors face. Generating and communicating trustworthy data is the bread and butter of peacebuilders.

Trustworthy data and analysis are also an entry-point for the new peacebuilding software for reconstruction in Syria. It means generating enough granular data so that it can contribute to localized reconstruction and trust-building processes. Such data generation is especially important to keep in check partisan or biased analysis emanating from inside and outside Syria.

Syria's housing and land management systems—muddied by generations of overlapping and contradictory policies—may illustrate this point. Much of the debate has focused on Law 10, passed by the Syrian government in April 2018. The law allows the creation by decree of redevelopment zones across Syria, but its lawfulness has been questioned because it would provide the government a free hand to confiscate and redevelop residents' properties without due process. Yet, Law 10 may be only a minor amendment in a series of fifty new laws enacted since 2011 on land and housing management. The task for independent analysis would be to deconstruct complex issues and generate understandings across divided communities. Key areas relevant for housing and land management systems could include, for instance, independent research on Syria's tenure system and inheritance laws, the growth of Syrian cities and the impact of the war, existing efforts by government-related actors to clear heavily bombarded districts and gentrify them, or the availability (or lack) of public funds to cover

local reconstruction costs. In concrete terms, such efforts could entail creating a capacity for reconstruction-relevant legal analysis.

From a peacebuilding perspective, independent analysis and the generation of trustworthy data on Syria's housing and land management practices are important for several reasons. Data and analysis can keep in check efforts on all sides to inflate topics (like Law 10) for advocacy purposes or to deflect attention from more difficult but more important issues such as housing, land and property rights for women, gentrification, or dysfunctional governance and justice systems. Independent analysis also contributes to evidence generation about the key grievances of many Syrians who have lost property or titles due to the war. Requiring such evidence is a protection against forgetting injustices. In Syria's highly politicized and securitized environment, it means creating political space for sustained institutional support by an honest broker.

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Finally, ensuring granularity and independence of data and analysis means strengthening new leadership at the international level that stands up for these principles. With respect to reconstruction, such leadership may come from financial markets that could make such data conditional for reconstruction packages. In this way, peacebuilding software could become part of these packages, each of which may require its own negotiation toward an investment coalition.

Overall, the strategic value of independent data and analysis lies in asserting checks and balances, generating common ground, and building confidence across different actors.

Step 2: Change your pair of glasses

Changing the pair of glasses means questioning existing beliefs about how social change happens. With such new glasses, policymakers may identify new agents and spaces for peacebuilding. Many policymakers in government and international organizations are accustomed to taking a macro view and see change as a top-down, government, or leader-driven process.

Equipped with this pair of glasses, however, they may not be able to see how people address violence and exclusion on a daily basis in their neighborhoods, with or without the help of formal authorities. They need to be cognizant of nuance and pursue a granular understanding of different contexts to grasp how

change can happen in even the most difficult places, and through “problem-driven iterative adaptation”. Public policy scholar Matt Andrews defines this as “a process of experimentation and trial and error, with multiple agents playing different leadership roles, producing a mixed form of hybrid that is fitted [to] a peculiar context”. While international actors discuss and ponder the leadership necessary to find solutions, many local actors wriggle their way out of destruction and dysfunction by solving one problem after the other in the best possible way.

The new pair of glasses may help identify the “who” of peacebuilding at a time of reconstruction in Syria. Reconstruction takes place at a micro level in many different spaces, involving limited self-help reconstruction or reconstruction packages as noted above. Within these processes of reconstruction, the key is to identify the people managing coexistence and disagreements. Such individuals are called different names by different constituencies, including insider mediators (in peace mediation circles), interrupters (in violence reduction circles), or transpublics (in community management circles). What these actors have in common is that they are connected to, and trusted by, important local constituencies and that they can build trust in processes and outcomes where formal authorities or other power holders are too weak or do not have the legitimacy to do so. They also speak the languages of different constituencies and therefore enable understanding and dialogue across divided communities or enemy groups. Finding and working with those actors in politically charged environments is not always easy. External support can undermine their efforts to play those critical bridge-building roles or even place their security at risk. This is why knowhow by external actors about how to advance independent, neutral, or non-partisan support in discrete ways is particularly important.

A new pair of glasses might also enable a vision on the spatial priorities for reconstruction. This spatial optic underlines the importance of trusted spaces in which local reconstruction processes can be conceived and negotiated and conflict addressed. This includes “safe houses” or “safe spaces”—physical environments for trusted exchanges—as well as “political space” or “political oxygen” that enable discreet work across social, religious, or political divisions. From this perspective, prioritizing spaces that matter to people’s daily lives—such as hospitals, markets, and schools—is important not just to deliver services, but also because they are places for weaving a new social fabric after war.

Step 3: Start in your own backyard

Western policymakers should increase their efforts to build peace in Syria by focusing on efforts in their own jurisdictions and organizations that they can directly affect. This means shifting the mindset from contributing to peace “out there” through efforts that are taking place inside Syria—or in its vicinity or

in the capitals of countries with major interests in the war—to contributing to peace in Syria “right here” through efforts in the policymaker’s own country.

One perspective on this point can be illustrated by the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) established by the UN General Assembly to assist in the investigation and prosecution of persons responsible for the most serious crimes under international law committed in Syria since 2011. The IIIM’s mandate is “to collect, consolidate, preserve and analyze evidence of violations of international humanitarian law and human rights violations and abuses and to prepare files in order to facilitate and expedite fair and independent criminal proceedings”. A lot of the work to prepare the files is done through justice institutions outside Syria, which have stronger capacities to process evidence that may at one point be used to prosecute war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Another entry point is stronger Western leadership to bolster the accountability of UN agencies and programs, bilateral donors, and businesses involved in humanitarian or reconstruction efforts in Syria. With key industrial, infrastructure, and natural resource assets given to its international backers, the regime has extended its grip on economic activities. The clientelistic relationships the government has developed over the last few years with international and local actors operating in its territory allows it to take a cut on most activities. This extractive component of the fierce state is a significant challenge and risk for all actors engaged in humanitarian, reconstruction, or commercial ventures in Syria. This is especially the case for UN agencies or other humanitarian actors who may be some of the regime’s biggest cash cows.

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There are two dimensions to this resource capture by the regime which should be kept in mind when adopting the third step of the peacebuilding software. First, Western governments could press for increased accountability of the UN’s engagement in Syria. Such efforts are sensitive but are technically and legally not impossible. A promising avenue for future work, for instance, could be the application of blockchains to increase the transparency of how Western funding is used in humanitarian operations. This would be a way to “follow the money” and account for flows that reach the Syrian government directly or indirectly.

A similar approach could be applied to business investments and a greater emphasis on sharing information about the legal and reputational risk for firms and banks to participate in economic reconstruction projects in Syria. Such efforts have already started, such as through the Human Rights and Business

Unit of the Syrian Legal Development Programme. The trend of de-risking in the finance sector has already made investors much more sensitive to the risk of war-affected countries, especially as long as sanctions remain in place.

But merely monitoring and assuring accountability for humanitarian actors in Syria may not be enough. A second dimension would address the limitations of the humanitarian lens, which is ill equipped to deal with complex interactions between manipulated humanitarian aid, strengthened and normalized autocratic governance in Syria, and the risk of either a perpetuated no-war, no-peace situation, or renewed violence. The basis of structuring post-war assistance under a humanitarian umbrella has deeper roots according to Peter Maurer, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross. He highlighted that over the last decade there was a “lack of political will to engage on conflict prevention” and a tendency to make every political question a humanitarian issue. “The UN system [is] at the core a political system which needs to think and work towards peace, preventing conflict and respecting human rights [yet] because this . . . was difficult to achieve, the [UN] system has easily moved into delivering humanitarian assistance and pretending it is neutral, impartial, and independent while it is a state-driven system.”

Building on this understanding of humanitarian politics, a starting point for Western policymakers may be to recognize that the focus on a humanitarian assistance umbrella will not necessarily build peace in Syria. Other narratives and approaches are necessary and the notion of “peacebuilding as software” may be a good place to start.

The steps noted above may provide an entry point for peacebuilding and reconstruction under the condition of Syria’s fierce state and authoritarian peace. The era of liberal peacebuilding is over, but that does not mean that a peace in Syria cannot be built. Syria could stand as a test case for a new type of peacebuilding, envisioned here as an adaptable software. By returning to the foundations of effective peacebuilding, looking with fresh eyes to the actors and spaces that can drive this endeavor, and focusing on what international policymakers can do in their own countries to help, those willing to lead may be able to reboot a peace process for Syria. 

This article is a short version of the chapter “Reconstructing Syria, Reinventing Peacebuilding?” in a forthcoming book titled Fractured Stability: War Economies and Reconstruction in the MENA.



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